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WHA/CEN - JENNIFER VANTRUMP

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TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [OAS](#) [BH](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: BELIZEAN PUBLIC IN AN UPROAR OVER FOREIGN
MINISTER'S COMMENTS TO THE OAS

Classified By: J.A. Diffily for reason 1.4(b) (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: A comment made by Foreign Minister Wilfred Elrington following a meeting at the Organization of American States (OAS) has stirred widespread discontent among Belizean nationalists, NGOs, and political leaders. Elrington was quoted as describing Belize's border with Guatemala as 'artificial' and saying that Belizeans and Guatemalans are the 'same people with the same aspirations and desires.' While the Minister may have viewed his choice of words as diplomatic, reactions in Belize range from mildly disapproving to deeply offended. Some view the statement as a mistaken use of language, while others see the comment as failing to reflect national views. More extreme reactions call for a public apology from Elrington, a clarification to OAS on the GoB's policy, or for the FM to be stripped of his portfolio. While Prime Minister Dean Barrow has noted that the comments were 'unfortunate', he continues in his support of Elrington. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On December 16, 2009, the Foreign Ministers of Belize and Guatemala met under the auspices of the OAS in Washington, D.C., to discuss the Belize-Guatemala Territorial Differendum. At the meeting, it was decided to establish a high-level working group to promote communication on the situation of the Adjacency Zone, to analyze issues provoking difficulties, and advance pending bilateral issues. Additionally, it was agreed that there would be a technical evaluation of the Confidence Building Measures to make recommendations for improvement.

¶3. (U) In Belize, Elrington's comments have caused significant public discontent. Elrington is quoted as saying, 'We have to interact to emphasize the view that we are not different from each other; the fact of this artificial border does not make us different. We are still the same people, with the same aspirations and desires.' Elrington's comment stirred widespread displeasure by Belizeans concerned with maintaining the country's territorial integrity and opposing any notion of Guatemalan usurpation.

¶4. (U) Elrington's comment came on the heels of press reports by the Amandala newspaper and TV Channel 7 of increasing border incursions by Guatemalan citizens from the Peten region. Channel 7's coverage began on December 7 with the report of the arrest of a 28-year-old Guatemalan in Caracol Archaeological Reserve just 500 meters inside Belizean territory. The Guatemalan national was caught with two freshly killed game animal carcasses believed to have been shot in the Chiquibul protected area. Belizean authorities later charged him with possession of an illegal firearm and ammunition, and he was remanded to prison until March 16, 2010. Channel 7 aired a series of reports that exposed deforestation, illegal logging, xate (sha-tay, a type of ornamental palm) extraction, hunting, and farming, all attributed to Guatemalan incursions in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve. On December 11, the Amandala newspaper reported a

visit by Mayan leaders into the Columbia River Forest Reserve and Bladen Nature Reserve which lie further south of the Chiquibul Forest Reserve. The report uncovered similar illegal operations by Guatemalan xateros.

15. (U) Following the OAS meeting, there were heated nationalist reactions condemning the Foreign Minister,s comments. Elrington staunchly defended his views in interviews. In an attempt to explain what he meant by "artificial" Elrington noted that the border was artificial in the literal sense that it is a man-made border as opposed to a natural border. In a later interview with Amandala on December 21, 2009, Elrington said that in Europe the importance of borders is downplayed. He noted that Belize participates in the Central American Integration System (SICA) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)) which are similar systems that downplay borders.

16. (U) These views failed to quell the outrage of nationalists, NGOs, the media, and fellow political personalities who have accused Elrington of failing to reflect Belizean national views. There have been calls for a public apology from Elrington and demands that the GoB clarify its position to the OAS. The most extreme demands were for the Prime Minister to strip Elrington of his ministerial portfolio.

17. (U) The initial reaction was sparked by nationalist Emma Boiton, who was the partner of the late Philip Goldson, a noted Belizean independence figure. Ms. Boiton was quoted in the Amandala Newspaper of December 18, "Their (Guatemala,s) goal is to take what does not belong to them; their goal is to take over Belize."8 She went on to say that "We (Belize)

have a border and we are not the same people,"8 adding that Belize and Guatemala do not even share the same language, the same culture, or the same beliefs.

18. (U) Gregory Choc, Executive Director of the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM) noted that Elrington,s comments were "outrightly outrageous."8 He has been among those urging PM Barrow to replace the Foreign Minister or risk Elrington,s statement being viewed as those of the GoB. (Note: Gregory Choc was the previous spokesperson of the Maya Leaders Alliance and remains a prominent member of the Alliance. End Note.)

19. (U) While media personality Jules Vasquez viewed Elrington,s comment as "a careless use of language,"8 another media personality and KREM TV,s manager, Mose Hyde, has been one of Elrington,s strongest critics calling for his resignation. Hyde announced his station,s decision to immediately cancel Elrington,s weekly television show "Belizean Exposure"8.

110. (U) On the political scene, John Briceno, the Leader of the Opposition, said: "we can,t have a minister of government talking about an abstract or artificial border,"8 and like others has called for a public apology and possibly a change of portfolio at the PM,s discretion.

111. (U) Senator Godwin Hulse, a nationalist and a private sector-nominated representative in the Senate, has also been a vocal opponent. He has called on Elrington "to offer a clear statement on this matter and inform the OAS accordingly, requesting them to issue another press statement with the clarification."8 He has challenged GoB to "clearly state what its policy is on our border with Guatemala and whether the Government considers it artificial,. If not, then Elrington has not represented the views of the Government and people of Belize, and therefore, should apologize or resign from the post of Foreign Minister."8

112. (U) Despite the general air of discontent, PM Barrow continues to support Elrington. While the PM views the FM,s comments as "unfortunate,"8 he said that calling for resignation is "blowing the issue completely out of

proportion.8 PM Barrow also said that an apology and clarification to the OAS are not necessary at this time.

¶13. (C) In a meeting with Ambassador on January 25, Elrington opened the meeting with comments about the event. He said that the &general masses8 do not have a complaint about the statement, that the comment presented an &occasion for enemies to express dislike8 of him, and that the &passionate resentment8 of his enemies is fueling their desire to &use resources to derail8 any public progress on the issue. Elrington said that Belize does not spend enough time educating the people on this issue.

¶14. (C) COMMENT. The public discontent is a reflection of the deeply nationalist views of Belizeans who oppose any idea of compromising their territorial integrity. The opposition to Elrington,s comments was further incited by news of the increasing number of incidents of border incursions by Guatemalans who are allegedly depleting the country,s natural resources along the unprotected border. Additionally, Elrington,s steadfast defense of his views also contributed to the escalating opposition. It is not expected that the public opposition will result in any change in GoB,s ministerial portfolio or GoB,s foreign policy position on the Belize-Guatemala Differendum. However, the sentiments expressed as a result of this incident may reflect growing skepticism about the provisions of the 2008 decision to take Guatemala,s claim for a final and binding decision before the International Court of Justice. The Belizean xenophobia aimed at Guatemala and Guatemalans manifests itself in not-so-subtle ways. Even well-educated Belizeans will speak of Guatemala as a threat to the independence of Belize. The public outcry against a statement that was given at the end of a productive meeting from which the Foreign Minister emerged feeling hopeful for resolution is, from Post,s view, unfortunate and a reflection of the lack of effort made by the GoB to educate the public on the issues. Post also finds it ironic that the public outcry against a statement about the border has the ability to incite such outrage but the public is silent on the GoB,s struggle to deal with the issues of the daily events at the virtually unprotected Belizean borders involving the trafficking of people, drugs, and all types of agricultural contraband. END COMMENT.
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